CHAPTER 16

The Intimate Same-Sex Relationships of Sexual Minorities

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The 1983 publication of Blumstein and Schwartz's *American Couples* marked a turning point in research on lesbian and gay relationships. During the 10 years before the publication of this volume, which reported the most detailed and thoroughgoing comparisons to date between heterosexual and same-sex couples, less than 50 books, chapters, or articles in the psychological literature had focused specifically on lesbian and gay couples. In the 10 years after the book's publication, the number of publications increased five-fold, and nearly doubled again during the next 10 years. The explosion of research on this topic reflects a growing awareness of the centrality of intimate relationships to the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals – studies have found that between 40% and 60% of gay men and 50% and 80% of lesbians are partnered (reviewed in Peplau & Spalding, 2000), and the majority of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals would like the option of formalizing such relationships through same-sex marriage (Kaiser Foundation, 2001, November).

The sophistication of research on this topic has also increased over the past 20 years. Whereas early studies were characterized by small, homogeneous samples, collection of data from only one member of the couple, the use of measures with unknown psychometric properties, exclusive reliance on self-report data, and lack of long-term longitudinal assessment, all of these weaknesses have been remedied in more recent work. This has made it possible for researchers to move beyond the early focus on basic differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples to more complex investigations of why same-sex couples resemble and differ from heterosexual couples and from one another.

This chapter provides an overview of current research on same-sex intimate relationships, emphasizing the most central and well-researched domains: relationship initiation, maintenance, satisfaction, and dissolution, gender-related dynamics, sexuality and sexual exclusivity, and violence and abuse. The chapter begins with a discussion of the implicit theoretical frameworks that have

guided research on this area and concludes by identifying some of the most interesting and complex questions that remain to be addressed by future research.

First, however, definitional issues require attention. Although the majority of research in this area addresses the *same-sex* intimate relationships of *openly identified* lesbians and gay men, this actually provides a somewhat restricted focus: not all lesbian- and gay-identified individuals participate in exclusively same-sex relationships, and not all individuals who participate in same-sex relationships identify as lesbian or gay. Such individuals (i.e., bisexual and "unlabeled" men and women) have been drastically understudied in relationship research, despite the fact that such individuals collectively outnumber openly identified lesbians and gay men (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). In growing acknowledgment of this fact, researchers increasingly use the term *sexual minorities* to refer to all men and women whose same-sex attractions or behaviors place them outside conventional heterosexual norms. This chapter uses this terminology, but nonetheless retains the descriptors *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* when summarizing studies or research traditions that specifically recruited research participants on the basis of lesbian, gay and bisexual identification.

Theoretical Perspectives on Same-Sex Relationships

Although there is no unified body of psychological theory specifically purporting to explain how and why same-sex couples do and do not differ from heterosexual couples, much research is implicitly guided by two explanatory frameworks. The first emphasizes the impact of *social stigmatization and homophobia* on sexual-minority couples, and the second focuses on the influence of *gender-related dynamics* (i.e., combining two men or two women in the same relationships).

Stigmatization

Although tolerance and acceptance of same-sex sexuality have been gradually increasing (Loftus, 2001), considerable prejudice and sometimes outright condemnation continue to exist. A recent national survey by the Kaiser Foundation (2001) found that more than three fourths of lesbian, gay, and bisexual survey respondents reported experiencing some form of prejudice or discrimination. Social stigmatization creates a range of unique social and psychological challenges for same-sex couples, such as the threat of physical violence (i.e., Brenner, 1995), disapproval or denial of one's relationship from either partner's family of origin (Caron & Ulin, 1997; LaSala, 2000; Oswald, 2002; Patterson, 2000), and also low-level stressors such as difficulty making hotel room reservations (Jones, 1996), receiving poor service and rude treatment during routine shopping (Walters & Curran, 1996), or uncertainty about bringing one's partner to family functions (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Oswald, 2002).

Of course, such factors are likely to vary dramatically as a function of different cultures' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Given that the bulk of research on same-sex couples is conducted in the United States, it is important to keep in mind that Americans are particularly conservative in this regard. Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb's (1998) analysis of 24 industrialized countries participating in the International Social Survey Program found that 70% of Americans believe that homosexual sex is "always wrong," compared with 39% of Canadians, 58% of British, 45% of Spaniards, and 42% of West Germans. The most conservative attitudes were found in Northern Ireland (80% reporting "always wrong"), Hungary (83%), and the Philippines (84%), whereas the most accepting attitudes were found in the Netherlands (19%). Such variation must be taken into account when drawing inferences about the relevance of social stigma for same-sex couples across diverse cultural contexts. It also bears noting that no

research has systematically tested whether same-sex couples living in more tolerant communities, cultures, or nations have substantially different relationship dynamics or outcomes than those living in more stigmatizing environments. Some research, however, has found that variation in gender- and sexuality-related childhood rejection relates to adult orientations toward interpersonal relationships (Allen & Land, 1999; Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram, & Perlman, 2004). Thus, links between social stigmatization of same-sex sexuality and couple functioning might be mediated by immediate, day-to-day stress *or* by cumulative influences on the development of interpersonal attitudes and orientations, both of which warrant substantive research attention.

Gender

Gender differences in interpersonal attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors, and their implications for couple functioning, have long been topics of vigorous research and debate, and studies of same-sex couples have provided unique opportunities to examine how broadly gender-related effects operate. One of the most common research questions is whether sexual-minority individuals are "gender-inverted" in their interpersonal functioning, such that gay men resemble heterosexual women and lesbians resemble heterosexual men, or whether sexual minorities show the same gender differences in relationship behavior that have been long-observed among heterosexuals.

Research findings support the latter view. Although some sexual-minority men and women are, in fact, gender-*atypical* in appearance, behavior, or interests (reviewed in Bailey, 1996), this does not generally extend to relationship behavior. With respect to well-documented gender differences such as men's greater interest in casual sex, their greater emphasis on a partner's youth and physical attractiveness, and women's greater interest in emotionally invested relationships, gay men and lesbians show the same gender differences that have been observed among heterosexuals (e.g., Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Hayes, 1995; Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, & Barr, 1995). Some have interpreted these findings to indicate that men and women – regardless of sexual orientation – are endowed with fundamentally different mating "programs" that evolved to serve their distinct reproductive challenges (Bailey et al., 1994), whereas others have argued that sexual minorities simply undergo the same gender socialization as do heterosexuals (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Regardless of interpretation, such studies have proven valuable in prompting researchers to articulate and empirically test otherwise implicit assumptions about links between sexual orientation and gender-specific behavior. They have also prompted useful investigations of how *combining* two men or two women in a couple relationship tends to magnify gender-specific patterns. Results from such studies, some of which are reviewed subsequently, have helped to explain not only how same-sex relationships differ from those of heterosexuals, but how the relationships of sexual-minority *women* differ from those of sexual-minority *men*.

Keeping these implicit frameworks of gender and social stigma in mind helps to provide a context for interpreting the different ways in which research questions in this area have historically been formulated and answered. For example, studies that emphasize social stigmatization might presume that its effects are gender-neutral, and may therefore fail to compare female–female with male–male couples. In contrast, approaches that emphasize gender may fail to assess the specific sociocultural context in which different couples are embedded or to consider the possibility that "gender magnification" effects might vary as a function of local community attitudes toward homosexuality *and* toward gender conformity. Clearly, future research exploring the *intersections* of gender and social stigma will produce the most useful and informative results; for the time being, the extant findings reviewed here must be interpreted with

an eye to what different studies do and do not assess and adjust for.

Relationship Initiation

Given the historical stigmatization and secrecy surrounding same-sex sexuality, much research on sexual minorities' relationships has focused on how they *find* eligible same-sex partners to begin with. Whereas older cohorts of sexual minorities did, in fact, rely on lesbian and gay bars and clubs to find potential partners (Berger, 1990), this is no longer necessarily the case. The progressively increasing societal openness regarding same-sex sexuality has allowed many sexual minorities to meet potential partners through a diverse range of channels, including work, school, friends, and recreational activities (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Elze, 2002). As for individuals living in more rural, isolated areas with smaller sexual-minority populations, the Internet has emerged into an important and highly utilized resource for finding and getting to know potential same-sex partners with minimal risk of exposure (Peplau & Beals, 2003).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of sexual-minority relationship initiation is the tendency for sexual minorities to develop romantic relationships out of close same-sex friendships (Nardi, 1999; Rose & Zand, 2000). Lesbians, in particular, frequently follow a "friendship script" in developing new relationships, in which emotional compatibility and communication are as important – if not more important – than explicit sexual interest or interaction (Rose & Zand, 2000; Rose, Zand, & Cimi, 1993). Gay men also frequently become involved with same-sex friends, but these involvements sometimes remain exclusively sexual rather than developing into long-term partnerships (Nardi, 1999). Furthermore, in contrast to the "friendship script" of relationship development observed among lesbians, gay men's relationship scripts are more likely to involve the establishment of sexual intimacy prior to the development of emotional intimacy (Rose et al., 1993). Lesbian couples have also been observed to follow a somewhat accelerated pathway to emotional exclusivity and commitment compared with heterosexuals and gay men. Cini and Malafi (1991) for example, found that lesbian couples often considered themselves an exclusive, emotionally involved couple by the fifth date. This emphasis on serious rather than casual involvement appears to become more pronounced at later stages of life. Rose and Zand (2000) found that among lesbians in middle and late adulthood, dating was so clearly oriented around the search for a potential long-term partner that women preferred to speak of themselves as "courting" than "dating." As noted earlier, these findings are consistent with gender differences that have been observed among heterosexuals, particularly regarding women's greater "relational" orientation in comparison to men (reviewed in Cross & Madson, 1997).

Relationship Maintenance and Satisfaction

Although same-sex relationships have been historically stereotyped as fleeting, unhealthy, and unhappy (Testa, Kinder, & Ironson, 1987), numerous studies over the past 20 years have confirmed that same-sex couples are generally as satisfied and dissatisfied as other-sex couples, for the same basic reasons: the balance of perceived rewards to perceived costs (Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002; Duffy & Rusbult, 1985). As with heterosexual couples, satisfaction in same-sex couples is positively associated with partners' similarity in attitudes and values (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Kurdek & Schnopp-Wyatt, 1997) as well as demographic background (R. L. Hall & Greene, 2002), perceptions of fairness and equity (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1989, 1995, 1998b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996), and a mutual emphasis on dyadic attachment – that is, shared activities, togetherness, intimacy, commitment, and sexual exclusivity (Deenen, Gijs, & van

Naerssen, 1994; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau & Cochran, 1981).

Same-sex relationships also show similar levels of stability as heterosexual relationships. One survey found that 14% of lesbian couples and 25% of gay male couples had lived together for 10 or more years (Bryant & Demian, 1994). Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) *American Couples* study found that over an 18-month period, 16% of the same-sex male and 22% of the same-sex female couples broke up, compared with 17% of the unmarried heterosexual couples and 4% of the married heterosexual couples. A more recent 5-year longitudinal study found breakup rates of 7% among married heterosexuals, 14% for cohabiting same-sex male couples and 16% for cohabiting same-sex female couples (Kurdek, 1998b).

Notably, several studies (Beals et al., 2002; Kurdek, 1992, 2000a) have found that the basic determinants of relationship stability are the same for same-sex couples as for heterosexual couples: specifically, the combination of *attractors* to the relationship, such as love and satisfaction, with psychological and structural *barriers to dissolution*, such as the lack of desirable alternatives, legal marriage, children, joint property, and so on, directly consistent with Rusbult's (1983) investment model. The lack of social–legal recognition for same-sex relationships means that same-sex couples automatically have fewer barriers to relationship dissolution than do married heterosexual couples, and this is directly consistent with the fact that their breakup rates are higher than those of married couples, but comparable to those of unmarried cohabiting heterosexuals (Kurdek, 1998b).

Determinants of relationship *satisfaction* are also similar across same-sex and heterosexual couples. Kurdek (1998b) found that relationship satisfaction in both types of couples was associated with appraisals of intimacy, autonomy, equality, and constructive problem solving. Additionally, trajectories of *change* in satisfaction over a 5-year period were the same across couple types. These findings are consistent with research indicating that same-sex couples use the same basic strategies to maintain their relationships as do heterosexual couples. For example, Haas and Stafford (1998) found that the most common maintenance strategies reported by gay and lesbian individuals were sharing tasks, communicating about the relationship, and sharing time together, similar to the findings for heterosexual individuals (Dainton & Stafford, 1993).

Notably, Haas and Stafford (1998) also identified several maintenance strategies that are specific to sexual-minority couples, such as choosing to live, work, or socialize in environments accepting of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, taking part in activities geared toward these populations, and being "out" as a couple. Yet the effects of such strategies may not be uniform across couples. Studies focusing on lesbians' openness versus secrecy about their relationships (Beals & Peplau, 2001; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000) have found that the impact of openness on relationship quality depends on whether it is met with acceptance versus rejection by family members, friends, and coworkers, as well as *correspondence* between partners' degrees of openness (Jordan & Deluty, 2000). Correspondence between partners has also been found to moderate the beneficial effects of lesbian, gay, and bisexual community involvement (Beals & Peplau, 2001).

Such findings raise important questions about the mechanisms through which gay-specific maintenance strategies operate. Some recent research suggests that these strategies might work both at the level of the dyad and at the level of the individual. Specifically, Elizur and Mintzer (2003) found that among gay men, having a positive gay identity and having strong social support from peers (both of which are likely fostered by living in gay-positive environments, participating in lesbian, gay, and bisexual activities, and "outness") were positively related to gay men's relationship durability and satisfaction. Furthermore, the effect of gay identification on these outcomes was found to be mediated by men's *self-acceptance*. This suggests, interestingly, that relationship maintenance strategies such as lesbian,

gay, and bisexual community involvement might prove effective not only because they bolster social support for the dyad (which has been previously found to enhance sexual-minority relationship functioning, as reviewed by Green & Mitchell, 2002), but because they bolster each partner's positive self-concept as a gay individual. The notion that positive self-concepts can enhance relationship functioning is certainly not new to relationship research, but Elizur and Mintzer's work is one of the first to systematically examine how this dimension informs our understanding of the unique dynamics underlying sexual-minority relationships.

Another important moderator is obviously gender. Duffy and Rusbult (1985) found that in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships, women reported more commitment to maintaining their relationships than men. This, of course, is consistent with theory and research suggesting that women are socialized to define themselves and their self-worth in the context of their relationships (Cross & Madson, 1997), giving them a greater "stake" in relationship maintenance. Interestingly, Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek (1986) found that this phenomena is not simply linked with gender, but with adherence to traditional norms of femininity. They found that across both gender and sexual orientation, greater *psychological* femininity (as assessed through a personality inventory) was associated with tendencies to respond to relationship difficulties by attempting to improve them or to wait for them to improve, whereas psychological masculinity was associated with exiting problematic relationships or allowing them to deteriorate.

Altogether, this body of research suggests that although the determinants of relationship maintenance and satisfaction are largely similar across same-sex and heterosexual couples, same-sex couples are characterized by unique challenges and dynamics – partly as a function of partners' "matched" gender and partly as a function of social stigmatization – that remain important areas for future investigation.

Relationship Dissolution

The limited number of studies specifically comparing relationship dissolution across same-sex and heterosexual couples have generally found no significant differences in the reasons for and psychological effects of dissolution (Kurdek, 1997a). In both types of couples, dissolution can be longitudinally predicted from relationship qualities such as intimacy, equality, and problem solving (Kurdek, 1998b), as well as the experience and expectation of affectively positive partner interactions (Gottman et al., 2003), compared with equivalent analyses of heterosexual couples in Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Gottman and colleagues' series of studies (which, notably, followed same-sex couples over an unprecedented 12-year period) also found that among both same-sex and heterosexual couples, high physiological reactivity during couple interactions predicted later dissolution.

As just alluded to Kurdek (1998b) found that across same-sex and heterosexual couples, the strongest *unique* predictor of relationship dissolution over a 5-year period, adjusting for initial relationship quality, is the presence of barriers to leaving the relationship, consistent with the results of other research (Beals et al., 2002). In light of such findings, and in light of the steadily increasing efforts to secure formal recognition for same-sex relationships, one interesting question is whether couples who take legally binding steps to affirm their mutual commitment, such as registering for a civil union, will have lower breakup rates over time than couples that pursue public but nonlegal forms of recognition, such as commitment ceremonies, or couples who have not undergone a commitment ceremony but have established other legal ties to one another, such as taking the same last name (Suter & Oswald, 2003) or merging finances (Beals et al., 2002). Comparing breakup rates across such couples would provide a unique opportunity to compare directly the stabilizing effect of structural versus personal–moral dimensions of relationship

commitment (Johnson, 1999). Additionally, given recent arguments over whether civil unions represent adequate substitutes for same-sex marriage, researchers might consider whether the specific degree, breadth, and perceived legitimacy of structural ties between same-sex partners is linearly related to their relationship stability.

Notably, some of these structural ties are more robust than couples may realize. Legal procedures for dissolving civil unions vary widely and are often poorly understood. For example, 85% of the same-sex couples who obtained official civil unions in Vermont by 2003 traveled there specifically for this purpose, and some have since discovered that they cannot formally dissolve such unions unless they are Vermont residents (Bernstein, 2003). Given such ambiguities, and sexual minorities' ambivalence about placing delicate matters of money and even child custody into the hands of potentially hostile court systems, some expect that same-sex couples might increasingly turn to professional mediators to assist with relationship dissolution (Walter, 2003), and the mediation field has shown increased awareness of – and calls for sensitivity to – their unique concerns (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001).

One issue that makes dissolution of same-sex relationships fairly unique is the tendency for sexual minorities to maintain close emotional ties – sometimes even best friendships – with their ex-partners after dissolution (Nardi, 1999; Shumsky, 2001), a phenomenon often attributed to the high value sexual minorities have been found to place on maintaining "chosen families" of supportive and accepting friends to compensate for troubled family ties (Nardi, 1992). The difficulties that long-standing "ex-lover" relationships introduce into individuals' new relationships has received some anecdotal and qualitative investigation (for examples, see Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996) but has not yet been the topic of systematic study across same-sex and heterosexual pairs. Given the contemporary prevalence of "blended" families, involving both stepparents and extended steprelatives, closer investigation of the strategies used by same-sex and heterosexual couples to balance ties to prior versus current partners is an important topic for future research.

Gender-Related Dynamics

As noted earlier, one of the most salient and unique dimensions of same-sex relationships is their potential to magnify gender-related dynamics. Numerous studies have investigated this phenomenon across a range of different relationship properties. With regard to individuals' perceptions of intimacy (typically of high value to women) versus autonomy (typically of high value to men) in their relationships, Kurdek (1998b) found mixed support for the notion that same-sex couples confer a "double-dose" of gender-linked relationship properties. Contrary to the notion that gay men should report uniquely high levels of autonomy, he found that both lesbian and gay male couples reported greater autonomy than did heterosexual couples.

As for intimacy, Kurdek detected a small but significant tendency for lesbian couples to report greater intimacy with their partners, assessed by self-reported factors such as shared time together and the degree to which partners maintained a "couple" identity. Similarly, Zacks, Green, and Marrow (1988) found that in comparison to heterosexual couples, lesbian couples reported higher levels of cohesion, adaptability, and satisfaction in their relationships, a result the authors attributed to women's gender role socialization. Recall, however, that lesbian couples have not been found to show greater relationship stability than either gay male or heterosexual couples. Rather, the results of Kurdek's (1998b) research suggest that having barriers to dissolving a relationship is more important for keeping it together than having a "double-dose" of female-typed relationship skills and maintenance strategies. In fact, some clinically oriented researchers have considered whether heightened levels

of intimacy in female–female couples might actually prove *detrimental* by promoting excessive psychological "fusion" or "merger" between partners (Biaggio, Coan, & Adams, 2002; Nichols, 1987). Thus, this body of research has provided important correctives to many implicit assumptions about the role of "female-typed" intimacy skills in relationship maintenance and quality.

Another topic of interest with regard to gender magnification in same-sex couples concerns power and equality in domains ranging from decision making, influence strategies, household labor, and problem solving. Although stereotypes have historically presumed that same-sex couples implicitly designate one partner to take the classically "female" role and one partner to take the "male" role in these domains, research does not bear out this view. Rather, gay and lesbian couples place a high value on equity in their relationships, and lesbians in particular report particular success in achieving equitable arrangements (Peplau & Cochran, 1980). Strategies for achieving equity follow a number of different patterns. With respect to household responsibilities, research indicates that same-sex couples develop largely idiosyncratic arrangements, allowing their respective interests and desires to shape daily practice (Huston & Schwartz, 2002). Accordingly, it is not uncommon for same-sex partners to mix and match female-typed and male-typed tasks and roles (i.e., Amy handles auto maintenance and most of the cooking, and Deb takes care of social arrangements and financial planning). Overall, same-sex couples show more equitable distributions of household labor than do heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1993; Patterson, 1995). However, male–male and female–female couples appear to operationalize equity in different ways, with male couples typically having each partner specialize in certain activities, whereas female couples tend to share task performance (Kurdek, 1993).

This is not to suggest, of course, that same-sex couples are uniformly successful in avoiding power differentials. For example, research has found that among both gay male and lesbian couples, income discrepancies tend to be associated with power differentials (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978; Reilly & Lynch, 1990), more so for for gay men than for women (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Research on influence strategies is also instructive. Historically, research in this area has differentiated between "weak," female-typed strategies (such as withdrawal or the expression of negative emotions) and "strong" male-typed strategies (such as bargaining, bullying, reasoning, or interrupting the other person). However, research comparing heterosexual couples to same-sex couples suggests that gender differences in the use of weak versus strong strategies have more to do with power than with gender (Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). Specifically, individuals who perceive themselves as more powerful tend to use stronger strategies, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, whereas individuals who perceive themselves as less powerful tend to use weaker strategies (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). Furthermore, Howard and colleagues (1986) found that for some influence strategies, the gender of one's *partner* proved more important than one's own gender: Specifically, manipulation and supplication were most common among individuals with male partners, regardless of the individual's gender.

Clearly, research on how each partner's gender – and gender socialization – shapes same-sex relationship dynamics has important implications for understanding such dynamics in *all* couples. Yet future investigations of such topics must be paired with more systematic assessments of individual differences *other than* gender to more clearly specify the mechanisms through which gender-related effects operate. For example, how might individual difference dimensions such as locus of control (Kurdek, 1997b, 2000b; Schmitt & Kurdek, 1987), attachment style (Gaines & Henderson, 2002; Kurdek, 2002), rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), and affective states such as anxiety and depression

(Kurdek, 1997b, 1998a; Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000; Schmitt & Kurdek, 1987) mediate or moderate the effects of gender composition on couple functioning? Future research along these lines will enable researchers to explain not only differences between female–female, male–male, and male–female couples, but to identify and explain differences within each relationship type.

Sexual Behavior and Satisfaction

Sexuality obviously plays an important role in couple functioning, and it is particularly salient for same-sex couples given that society defines and categorizes lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals on the basis of their sexuality. However, most research on sexuality among sexual minorities has focused on *individuals'* desires and behaviors rather than the *relationship* context of sexuality (reviewed in Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004). The few data available suggest that, as with heterosexual couples (reviewed in Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, this volume), same-sex couples' sexual satisfaction is strongly related to their global relationship satisfaction (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Deenen et al., 1994; Kurdek, 1991; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997). Interestingly, however, the type of sexual relationship that some same-sex couples consider satisfying differs from typical heterosexual norms. For example, as noted by Frye (1990), many lesbians endorse fairly broad conceptualizations of "sexual activity" that include behaviors such as hugging, cuddling, and fondling one another's bodies without necessarily attempting or achieving orgasm, whereas mainstream American adolescents and adults endorse more restrictive definitions of "sex" that focus on penetration and orgasm (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Yet notably, despite granting a less central role to orgasm in sexual activity, lesbian couples appear to have particularly high rates of orgasm (Jay & Young, 1979; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Lever, 1994; Loulan, 1987; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978). Also, lesbians appear to place a greater value than do heterosexual couples on equality in both initiating and refusing sexual activity, consistent with the fact that lesbian couples have been found to place a high emphasis on equality in their relationships in a variety of domains (Kurdek, 1995).

Considerable attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of sexual infrequency in long-term lesbian couples, sometimes called "lesbian bed death" (Iasenza, 2002). As reviewed by Peplau et al. (2004), the prevalence, causes, and relative "healthfulness" of diminished sexual frequency in lesbian couples have been hotly debated. Is it a dysfunctional consequence of excessive intimacy, a side effect of women's socialization toward sexual passivity and shame, or a methodological artifact of overly restrictive definitions of "sex" in conventional questionnaires? In wading through these debates, it becomes clear that research on the causes and consequences of this phenomenon would benefit greatly from more systematic integration with the research literature on heterosexual female sexuality, particularly female sexual dysfunction. A random, representative study of American adults found that more than 30% of women reported difficulties with sexual arousal and sexual desire (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). Coupled with the tendency for women not to take the lead in initiating sexual activity as a result of conventional female socialization (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Nichols, 1988, 1990), one might question whether most long-term heterosexual couples might also experience "bed death" if they did not have a reliably interested and initiatory male partner.

Some psychologists have argued that for some lesbian couples, low sexual frequency might be perfectly healthful to the extent that it meets both partners' needs (Fassinger & Morrow, 1995), whereas others may simply need to make specific efforts to respect and manage – rather than eradicate – differences between their sexual drives (M. Hall, 2001). Clearly, we

need to maintain a critical perspective on contemporary definitions of – and proposed clinical treatments for – female sexual "problems" *in general* (Tiefer, 1999) to understand the causes and consequences of diminished sexual activity among lesbians. These topics will receive continuing research and debate in future years, particularly given the possibility that younger cohorts of sexual-minority women, who have grown up with more open and accepting environments regarding female sexuality, might show different patterns of sexuality in their long-term relationships.

Sexual Exclusivity

With respect to male couples, one factor that has received considerable attention concerns the degree of sexual exclusivity in the relationship. As documented by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), male–male couples are more likely than either male–female or female–female couples to report engaging in extradyadic sexual activity, often with the explicit knowledge of their partner (see also Bryant & Demian, 1994; Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Peplau et al., 1997). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) also found that gay male couples were less likely than lesbian or heterosexual couples to report that monogamy was important to them. However, such attitudes among gay men may be undergoing historical change. Contrary to what one might expect on the basis of findings published in the early 1980s, a 1994 survey ($N = 2{,}500$) conducted by *The Advocate* (Lever, 1994), a lesbian and gay magazine, found that although 48% of gay men reported having participated in extradyadic sexual activity in their relationships, more than 70% indicated that they preferred long-term monogamous relationships to other arrangements.

The degree to which extradyadic sexual activity and relationship satisfaction are associated with one another appears to depend on a number of factors, such as whether it is illicit versus part of a mutual relationship "contract" (Hickson et al., 1992). Some couples, for example, view extradyadic sexual encounters as having positive effects on the primary relationship (Deenen et al., 1994). Yet even couples with positive attitudes toward – and explicit agreements permitting – extradyadic sex may find that they need to revise such agreements over time to account for unanticipated reactions and situations (LaSala, 2001). In making provisions for such opportunities within their relationships, some male couples define specific conditions under which extradyadic sex is and is not acceptable, often relating to safer sex practices, whether it occurs in the home, disclosure to or direct involvement of the other partner, and degree of emotional attachment to the other partner. Notably, gay men report feeling more threatened by a partner's emotional infidelity than sexual infidelity, exactly the reverse of heterosexual men (Dijkstra et al., 2001), perhaps reflecting gay men's expectation that men are generally more successful than women in separating love from sex, and hence in pursuing extradyadic sex that is, in fact, "just sex."

Given recent historical changes regarding attitudes toward, recognition of, and men's participation in committed same-sex partnerships, rates of – and rules about – extradyadic sexual activity may change, and deserve close attention. For example, one recent study of gay couples in Vermont that had obtained civil unions found that these couples reported lower rates of extradyadic sexual activity than have been found in prior research (Campbell, 2002). Longitudinal research is obviously necessary to determine whether such associations – if they are reliable – represent self-selection (i.e., the most exclusive couples are the ones most likely to seek legal recognition for their relationship) or whether the process of obtaining a civil union changes partners' attitudes toward – and behavior within – their relationships. Another topic for research is whether contemporary cohorts of young gay men, who are exposed to a far greater number of positive images of successful gay male couples than have been previous cohorts, might have significantly more optimistic expectations for forming stable and satisfying long-term

relationships, and hence different attitudes about sexual exclusivity.

Violence and Abuse

Contrary to the notion that domestic violence is unique to the patriarchal dynamics of male–female pairings, recent years have seen increasing documention of violence and abuse within same-sex relationships, ranging from physical behaviors such as hitting, slapping, scratching, and attacking with a weapon, to nonphysical behaviors such as threats, denigration, and sexual coercion (L. K. Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Regan, Bartholomew, Oram, & Landolt, 2002; Walder-Haugrud, 1999; C. M. West, 1998, 2002). Although accurate prevalence estimates are difficult to obtain, prior studies have found incidence rates ranging from 25% to 50% (Alexander, 2002; C. M. West, 2002). Notably, sexual-minority adolescents are not immune from these problems: Elze (2002) found that one third of female sexual-minority youths in northern England had experienced verbal or physical abuse in their dating relationships in the previous 12 months, including 28% of the girls who had only dated other girls.

Thus far, studies have found that the correlates of relationship violence in same-sex couples parallel those found in heterosexual couples, such as conflicts over dependency, jealousy, money, power, and substance abuse (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughan, 2002). Some unique patterns, however, have emerged. For example, a recent study of gay male couples (Regan et al., 2002) found that some forms of violence that typically occupy the upper end of the severity continuum for heterosexual couples, such as punching and hitting, tended to cluster with lower-severity violent behaviors among gay male couples. Alternatively, some behaviors that are lower in severity for heterosexual couples, such as twisting arms, pulling hair, and scratching, cluster with higher-severity violent behaviors among gay men. The authors suggested that men might resort to punching and hitting earlier in a male–male conflict than in a male–female conflict, given that this behavior has more serious consequences when directed toward a weaker and smaller woman (and also potentially because some boys become accustomed to hitting and punching other boys in the context of childhood fights). With regard to hair pulling and scratching, they argued that these behaviors in gay male couples might index the escalation of a fight to a prolonged, close-proximity struggle. Unique dynamics have also been observed in lesbian couples. For example, one recent study (Miller, Greene, Causby, White, & Lockhart, 2001) found that physical *aggression* was more common than outright violence in lesbian relationships, and that it was best predicted by relationship fusion, whereas physical violence was best predicted by measures of control. Such findings raise important questions about how male and female socialization, as well as men's and women's different histories of physically aggressive conflicts in childhood, relates to the patterns of violence and abuse observed in male–female, male–male, and female–female couples.

Understanding such dynamics is critically important for the design and implementation of effective antiviolence interventions. For example, given that the overwhelming majority of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships is conducted by men, the training of clinicians and social workers may be inadequate to address the factors underlying female–female relationship violence. Additionally, it is important to consider whether sexual-minority relationships might be particularly vulnerable to relationship violence as a function of the stress and pressure of social stigmatization, or maladaptive patterns of social functioning derived from histories of parental or peer rejection or victimization. Such information might prove to be particularly important in preventing sexual-minority *youths* from developing stable, maladaptive patterns of dealing with social stigma *and* with relationship problems (see, for example, Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991).

Along the same lines, it is important to investigate larger social-structural responses to same-sex relationship violence (T. W.

Burke, Jordan, & Owen, 2002; Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003; Potoczniak, Murot, Crosbie Burnett, & Potoczniak, 2003). Historically, much attention has been devoted to the ways in which institutionalized patriarchy and sexism contribute to male–female relationship violence by creating a climate of tolerance for male power over their female partners, both at the level of community norms and at the level of policing and legal responses to domestic violences. Among sexual-minority couples, the same question might be posed with respect to institutionalized and internalized homophobia (Tigert, 2001). Failures of local communities and policing-legal institutions to intervene actively in same-sex domestic violence might reflect and reinforce a sense that same-sex couples are less valuable individuals. Clearly, future research in this area is important for understanding the multiple ways in which the cultural stigmatization of same-sex sexuality influences sexual minorities' feelings and behaviors within their most intimate relationships.

Replacing Old Assumptions With New Questions: Cautions and Future Directions

In considering directions for future research on sexual-minority or same-sex relationships, it is important to remain mindful and critical of the cultural assumptions that typically underlie our research questions. For example, as noted earlier, the majority (specifically, 74%) of sexual minorities report wanting the option of legal same-sex marriage (Kaiser Foundation, 2001). Yet consider this finding more carefully: What do we know (or should we try and find out) about the one fourth of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals who don't want the option of legal marriage? Our historical emphasis on documenting that sexual minorities want and achieve the same types of long-term relationships as do heterosexuals can potentially blind us to important questions about alternative, unexpected relationship types and desires that might challenge our own assumptions about the optimal form, duration, and developmental trajectories of same-sex and other-sex intimate relationships.

For example, many sexual-minority and heterosexual scholars and laypeople have responded to the historical exclusion of sexual-minority individuals from the institution of marriage with critical reflection about the political, social, legal, and personal meaning of marriage and "marriagelike" relationships. Some have come away from such reflections strongly critical of the patriarchal underpinnings of traditional marriage and the specter of religious or governmental regulation of personal relationships. Others, more provocatively, have argued that an even more dangerous problem is the hegemonic notion that exclusive, monogamous sexual and romantic partnerships are the most healthy, desirable, and worthy of legal recognition (for a range of views on these issues, see Butler, 2002; Ettelbrick, 1993, 2001; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004; Sullivan & Landau, 1997; Warner, 1999). In light of these issues, some have argued that instead of advocating for same-sex marriage, activists should promote greater awareness and appreciation of alternative relationship practices among same-sex and other-sex couples, such as maintaining separate residences from a primary partner (Hess & Catell, 2001); pursuing multiple or nonmonogamous partnerships (Munson & Stelboum, 1999; Rust, 1996; C. West, 1996); developing romantic, emotionally primary, but nonsexual relationships (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993); or forgoing "primary" ties altogether in favor of "chosen families" of close friends (Nardi, 1999; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996). Researchers should take our cue from these debates and devote increasing attention to the prevalence and long-term implications of such practices.

Another important area for future research concerns the relationship experiences of bisexual individuals, who have been historically underrepresented in research on sexual minorities. Despite recent increases in the cultural visibility and perceived legitimacy of "bisexual" as a

stable sexual identity category (see Rust, 2000), it remains more highly stigmatized than exclusive homosexuality (Eliason, 1997; Eliason, 2001; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Paul, 1996) and is frequently misunderstood and denigrated even within lesbian and gay communities (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 1995). This can create particular problems for bisexual individuals whether they maintain long-term relationships with same-sex or other-sex partners. The social and psychological complexities involved in transitioning between successive same-sex and other-sex relationships also warrant close attention because these transitions often prompt feelings of having to "come out" – as lesbian or heterosexual – all over again (Diamond, 2000, 2003a).

Fluidity in sexual attractions and behavior, and the way in which it shapes and is shaped by relationship experiences, also warrants research attention, particularly among women. Researchers have long noted that some women appear to experience same-sex desires only in the context of a single, unexpectedly intense emotional bond (reviewed in Diamond, 2003b), and this phenomenon now appears to be related to the broader phenomenon of "situation-dependence" or "plasticity" in sexuality, which appears to be more common in women than in men and which cuts across sexual orientation (see Baumeister, 2000, for a comprehensive review). Given that intimate relationships appear to be among the most common triggers for sexual fluidity, future research should systematically investigate how common such experiences are among women and men, the mechanisms through which they operate, and their long-term implications for sexual experience and identity. Another fascinating topic with regard to fluidity concerns how same-sex and other-sex couples manage either partner's periodic experience – and potential expression – of desires that contradict his or her self-described sexual orientation. Some research in this vein has been conducted on bisexually attracted individuals in heterosexual relationships (Buxton, 2001; Edser & Shea, 2002; Reinhardt, 2002), but much more could be gained by a broader perspective that treats incongruencies among love, desire, and identity as its central focus, and this does not presume neat and impermeable boundaries between heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and life histories.

Finally, a fundamentally important priority for future research involves greater investigation of ethnic-minority same-sex relationships. Historically, the majority of research on same-sex couples has been conducted with White and middle-class samples; much greater research is needed dissecting the complex interacting influences of race, culture, and class on such relationships, particularly given that such factors often influence the degree to which one's family and local community tolerates or condemns same-sex sexuality (Chan, 1992; Collins, 1990; Hidalgo, 1984; Stokes, Miller, & Mundhenk, 1998). For example, some foreign languages have no positive or neutral terms for "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual" (Espin, 1997), raising fascinating questions about how individuals with such backgrounds come to conceptualize same-sex relationships as they grow up and how they perceive and speak about such relationships in adulthood. Couples in which partners have different ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds also pose particularly interesting and important questions: Research on a small group of African American lesbians, for example, has found that social class differences often posed salient and intractable problems for intimate relationships (R. L. Hall & Greene, 2002), often involving perceptions that a long-term involvement with a partner from a starkly different social class or ethnic background might further distance a sexual-minority from her family members and local community.

Conclusion

In sum, during the past 20 years, the volume and sophistication of research on same-sex intimate relationships has increased

dramatically. In this chapter, I have focused on seven areas of research:

1. Relationship initiation, in which same-sex romantic relationships – particularly among women – are distinguished by the fact that they frequently emerge out of friendships;
2. Relationship maintenance and satisfaction, in which many of the same antecedent factors operate for same-sex as for other-sex relationships, although a number of maintenance strategies specific to same-sex couples have been documented;
3. Relationship dissolution, in which similar factors (e.g., the absence of barriers) operate in same-sex and other-sex couples, although sexual minorities are distinguished by a greater tendency to maintain close emotional ties to ex-partners after dissolution;
4. Gender dynamics, in which sexual minorities have been found to place a high value on equity in their relationships;
5. Sexual behavior, in which similar links between sexual satisfaction and global relationship quality have been detected in same-sex and other-sex couples, although studies of same-sex couples raise important definitional issues about the meaning of different sexual behaviors and experiences;
6. Sexual exclusivity, in which the historical finding of greater nonmonogamy among gay men appears to be shifting;
7. Violence and abuse, a relationship phenomenon that has received increasing attention and analysis in same-sex couples.

Overall, the research reviewed here demonstrates that the similarities between same-sex and other-sex couples outnumber the differences.

In considering the history and future of psychological research on sexual-minority relationships, the underlying cultural assumptions and unavoidable political dimensions that shape the asking and answering of questions about same-sex relationships warrant continual scrutiny. In an influential critique of early research on lesbian and gay individuals, Kitzinger (1987) pointed out that the long-standing emphasis on documenting the *lack* of significant mental health differences between gay and lesbian and heterosexual individuals might have appeared to represent the triumph of scientific objectivity over social prejudice, but in fact functioned to *reinforce* the social disenfranchisement of sexual-minority individuals by implicitly predicating their social acceptability on patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that were judged "normal" and "healthy" by mainstream society. Her analysis demonstrates the importance of vigilantly monitoring the multiple sociocultural and political forces inescapably shaping the context in which research on sexual-minority relationships is conducted and interpreted. We must continually check and revisit our explicit and implicit theories of sexuality and relationships in order to appropriately represent how these phenomena develop, unfold, and interact within the life courses of diverse sexual-minority individuals. The end result of such efforts will be a deeper understanding of intimate relationships in the context of same-sex sexuality *and* a deeper understanding of same-sex sexuality in the context of intimate relationships.

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